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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000054

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

LONDON, PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

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SUBJECT: REFUGEE REPATRIATIONS IN DJIBOUTI: CHAOTIC BUT  
ACHIEVED

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. ConOff and a USAID representative observed UNHCR-directed refugee repatriations November 24 in Djibouti. The process was disorganized and confrontational, and fraud was blatant. But in the end, the day resulted in 511 refugees repatriated from the Ali Addeh refugee camp in Djibouti to northern Somalia. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On November 24, ConOff and a USAID representative accompanied UNHCR and the Djiboutian National Organization for Assistance to Refugees and Disaster Victims (ONARS) to witness the repatriation of 79 refugee families (511 individuals) to northern Somalia, the relatively politically stable area known as Somaliland. They had all been living in the Ali Addeh refugee camp in southern Djibouti for as much as 15 years. The repatriation was one of a number of such events designed to return all refugees to Somaliland and close the refugee camps in Djibouti by 2006.

¶3. (U) The evening before the repatriation, the refugees arrived at a staging area outside the city of Djibouti. They had been brought in trucks, complete with all the belongings they were taking back to Somaliland. At the staging area, the trucks were filled with the repatriation package allotted to each family. The package, varying slightly based on family size, consisted of 9 months worth of staple foods, cooking utensils, sleeping mats, protective tarps, etc. Packages also included U.S. dollars, which were only to be distributed immediately prior to departure. Each family was assigned to a truck according to their destination within Somaliland. One truck was left empty as a precaution in case any other vehicle broke down en route.

¶4. (U) Observers arrived shortly after 9:00am. We observed men leaving the staging area & in protest urged on by an elderly leader. They were upset that a refugee had been arrested the previous evening after an altercation with local police. According to UNHCR representatives (translating for Embassy personnel) the men declared solidarity with the arrestee and refused to leave without him. (Comment. ConOff believes the men waited until the arrival of the observers, to emphasize their point. Most of the men only went about 100 meters down the road and then sat under a tree to wait for resolution. End Comment.)

¶5. (U) Shortly after the men left, the women began organizing in groups to protest the food included in the package. One older woman started inciting the others, declaring that the flour was old. The arguments continued for more than an hour, and moved to other topics such as the substitution of dried peas for beans (they had been promised beans, but only peas were available at the time.) They demanded more cooking oil in place of the beans. Oil is a more salable commodity, translating easily to cash.

¶6. (U) At some point during the argument, one of the women revealed to UNHCR that the man arrested was not from Ali Addeh, and therefore not eligible to be repatriated with this convoy. While this argument was taking place, UNHCR employees were comparing names on the list from the camp of individuals that had volunteered for the convoy and turned in their ration cards, to the pink slips that they were given in exchange for the ration cards. The double-checking was to precede the distribution of cash. The process brought significant discrepancies to light. About 20% more pink slips were presented than appeared on the official lists. This led to another heated argument. The head of ONARS accused UNHCR of incompetence in running a repatriation operation. The UNHCR employees became indignant and said they couldn't control fraud, and insisted that their signatures had been forged on the pink slips.

¶7. (U) It was decided that individuals not appearing on the original list would not be transported with this convoy. Food that had been allocated to them earlier that day was now unloaded from the trucks and two trucks were designated to return those stores to the warehouse in Djibouti. This caused a protest from local laborers saying they had been employed only to load the trucks, not unload them. Rapid negotiations led to a new fee agreement, and the food was

reallocated appropriately.

¶18. (U) Meanwhile, a few of the refugees, seeing the cash being counted, claimed the dollars were counterfeit. The currency was in stacks of crisp new bank bills, and it's possible that most refugees had never seen new bills. In a country where bills are circulated so often they become very worn, new documents may be considered suspect. However, our driver informed ConOff that a few savvy individuals were angling to get the money in Euros because of the recent weak exchange rate for U.S. dollars.

¶19. (U) By 1:00 pm, the organizers were becoming visibly anxious about the delays. The trucks, special rugged vehicles required for the difficult conditions, had been brought in from Somalia and only had permission to remain in Djibouti for 48 hours. The convoy had to cross the border before nightfall. The intense heat was exacerbating issues, as observers had not planned to spend the day at the staging area. Shelter from the sun, as well as food and drinking water were scarce. A decision was made to move the convoy immediately, and resolve remaining issues on the other side of the border.

¶10. (U) On half hour later, an announcement was made that the convoy was leaving, and only individuals named on the original list drawn up at the camp would be transported. The cash would be distributed after crossing the border. An intense flurry of activity immediately followed. As soon as it became clear that the assigned foodstuffs were no longer open for negotiation (no ground appeared to have been given), an instant barter system sprang up, and families began trading their goods amongst each other, bags of peas and maize moved from one truck to the next, while oil, cooking tins or other goods moved back to yet other vehicles. Within half an hour, the trucks were loaded and the convoy lined up to head towards Somalia.

¶11. (SBU) Comment. This was the 14th repatriation to take place from Djibouti in 2004. ConOff was surprised that the process is still so chaotic. The system for checking individuals against the official list of registered repatriation candidates was cumbersome, and ineffective. The list was not alphabetized or organized in any other method that ConOff could determine. Further, the organizers did not seem to know how many should be on the list, and therefore, how much food should be provided. The trucks that were loaded with repatriation packages for individuals not on the official list created extra confusion and wasted time and effort. The idea of distributing the cash after crossing the border seems to have been a decision of desperation; although it was immensely logical given the high degree of fraud, and observers were amazed it hadn't been done that way in the past. Fraud was mentioned repeatedly throughout the day. Past repatriations have resulted in as little as 20% of individuals who accepted the package of food and money actually crossing the border into Somalia. According to UNHCR, 515 individuals did in fact cross the border this time and accept their money on the other side. It remains to be seen how many actually stay in Somalia, and how many sell their packages and return to Djibouti as refugees, as illegal economic migrants, or as Djiboutian citizens who managed to defraud the refugee coordinators. End comment.

¶13. (U) As of December, 8,086 individuals comprising 1,632 families have been repatriated from Djibouti to Somaliland in 14 convoys. The total number remaining in the refugee camps is 13,810 (Ali Addeh: 6,955 and Holl Holl: 6,855). In addition, the Aour Aoussa Transit Center holds 3,775 refugees, 3,395 of whom are from South and Central Somalia.  
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